

Wood, Maxine

A CAREER WITH A CHALLENGE;
VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION
COUNSELING OF BLIND PERSONS.

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A CAREER with a CHALLENGE

Vocational Rehabilitation Counseling of Blind Persons

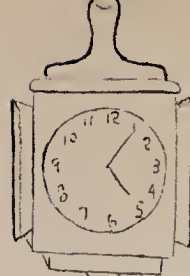
by MAXINE WOOD

with illustrations by CORINN ROWE

AMERICAN FOUNDATION *for the Blind*

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EMPLOYEE
ENTRANCE



*Blind persons can be
a part of this group*

VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION COUNSELING OF BLIND PERSONS

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What Can the Average Blind Person Do to Earn a Living?



What can the average blind person do to earn a living?

You may have heard someone ask this question. Perhaps you have even asked it yourself. It wouldn't be surprising. To many people the very word, blind, is synonymous with helplessness.

They may be familiar with the name of Helen Keller, filled with admiration for her achievements; they may even have heard of other blind men and women who have successful careers, but—there's usually a but—aren't these individuals blessed with superior intelligence or talent in a particular field?

If there's such a question in *your* mind, a talk with a vocational rehabilitation counselor specializing in work with blind persons would very likely change your mind.

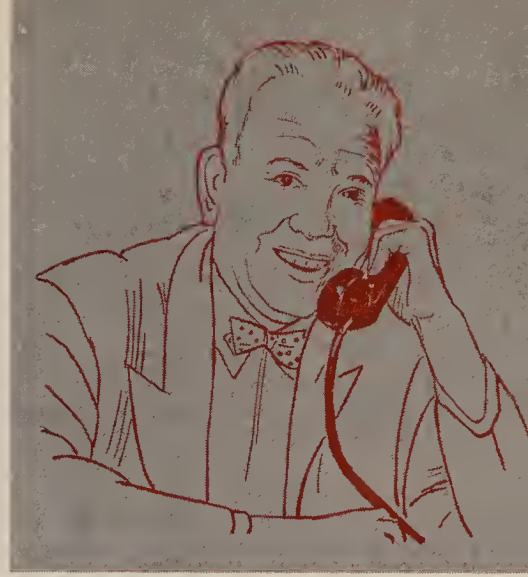
Here is what some of them say:

"What do you mean a blind person is helpless? Blindness is a limitation—a severe one. But every human being has some limitations, both physical and mental. Once a blind person faces the reality of his handicap, he can live an active and satisfying life."

"You can't generalize about the blind. Some have brains, some have a very low I.Q. Some have the dispositions of angels, some are hot-tempered. Some are ambitious, some are mule stubborn, and some are lazy. Each one is an individual with his own assets and liabilities; his own potentialities and his own problems. Very often these have nothing to do with his visual handicap.

"Sure, there's a period when a newly blinded person will feel that life is not worth living. That usually comes when he is certain that he will never see again. Nevertheless there are very few suicides among the blind. In time—it varies from months to years—this mourning period for his dead eyes passes. When it does, provided he is not drugged with an overdose of pity from friends and relatives, he will want to get out of that chair they've reserved for him and into some activity. To do so he may need professional assistance. That's when I as a rehabilitation counselor can help him."

Blind People at Work



The fact that counselors working with blind persons are optimistic can easily be verified by interviews with blind people, who, with the assistance of rehabilitation counseling and the community and public services made available to them, are busy earning their living, raising their families and enjoying their favorite hobbies.

Take Herbert _____ who, until he was forty, was a certified public accountant in a large eastern city. Then, suddenly without warning he had a cerebral hemorrhage.

"I survived the hemorrhage, but it left me totally blind. The doctor said I was lucky to be alive. I can't say I shared his point of view. For eighteen months I did nothing but listen to the radio. My wife went back to work, took care of the house, our two small boys and me. Her biggest job, though, was trying to cheer me up. 'At least our family is all together,' she'd say. 'With your disability insurance and blind pension and my earnings we're able to manage. A lot of people are worse off than we are.'

"True—every word of it was true—only it didn't shake me out of my depression. Nothing did, even listening to the World Series. I'm a baseball fan, still am.

"It was a rehabilitation counselor from the state agency for the blind who pulled me out of my black mood. He persuaded me to go to a rehabilitation center for blind people. He had a lot of persuading to do to make me agree, but he finally succeeded. I was there for twelve weeks. In just a few weeks a wonderful thing happened. I learned how to travel

with a cane, not just from chair to bed, but on the street. It was like—I don't know how to describe it except to say it was like being born again. That first day when I crossed a street by myself, I made a decision. I was going to stop being sorry for myself and start living a normal life.

"From that day on I spent a lot of time in the shop they have at the center to see if I had any aptitude for tools and machinery. I didn't. I'd always been awkward with my hands and blindness didn't make me any less so.

"But my decision to be of some use to myself and my family stuck. The next thing I hit upon was a chicken farm. Not that I knew anything about chickens and farming. I'd only spent three months in the country in my life, but I'd heard of a blind man who'd made a success of raising chickens. When the doctor ruled that out as too strenuous an occupation for me I was very discouraged, but my rehabilitation counselor wasn't. He hadn't been too enthusiastic about my taking up farming at my age in the first place, but had told me to go ahead and explore the possibilities. He'd always felt that on the basis of my past business experience I could make a success of operating a vending stand. So I decided to give it a try.

"The state agency trained me and set me up in business, supplying all the equipment. I've been operating this stand for three years now. "I like it. I make a good living too. My customers tell me it's the best place to eat lunch in this neighborhood."

Mr. and Mrs. John ——— live in a small town in Pennsylvania. According to Mrs. John ———, "In the city there are lots of jobs for people, including the blind. I'm a musician. I play the piano, compose a little, and sing. I used to earn quite a bit of money singing in night clubs and for special affairs.

"But when the children came—we have five, all in school—I felt I had to be home with them. And both John and I

felt they would be better off in a small town so we moved here where my family live. John found work as a shipping clerk, but it takes a lot of money to raise a family. I needed to help out. I knew it had to be something I could do at home, and I made up my mind it had to be something that brought me in contact with people. I'm a sociable person. That's how I hit upon a telephone answering service.

"John and I couldn't swing it ourselves. But the state agency for the blind agreed that if I could get a dozen customers signed up they would supply the office equipment. The Lion's Club put up the partitions to make an office in my home, and the telephone company rents me my braille board.

"I have thirty accounts now. Naturally I would like more, yet I'm lucky to have this business. John's been laid off temporarily because of the recession. But we'll get along until he finds something to do."

Robert _____ who is a darkroom technician in a large city hospital has a different story to tell.

"In a way this is a new profession for me, though I've been at it for two years now. Before this I worked in a factory making equipment for radios. Though blind, my production record was one of the best. Never any complaints. I worked in that plant for seven years, then my department was closed down, and I had to find other work. It wasn't easy. It took months before I landed a job in an auto parts shop. Something had happened to me during that time I was looking for work. I felt sick inside. I'd never minded noise before but the noise in that place made me so nervous I couldn't do a decent job.

"No use trying to get me another, I told the counselor at our agency for the blind. I'm through. He wouldn't go along with me on that. He was sure with my work record there were several things I could do, that some of those aptitude tests might throw some light on the subject. So I took them—

and what do you know—they indicated I was far from washed up. There were lots of jobs I could do if I had the technical know-how. This type of work, developing X-rays, appealed to me most. My counselor arranged for me to get the necessary training and here I am.

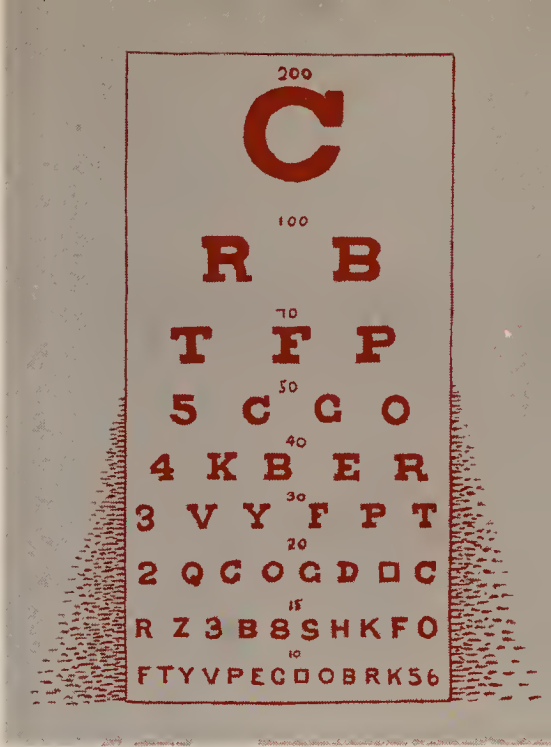
“The hours are good. I have plenty of energy left over to do other things. I’m a ham radio operator. I know quite a bit about radios. A sighted friend of mine knows a lot about TV. We’ve started a radio and TV repair shop. It’s going to be fun to see how it turns out.”

Herbert _____, Mrs. John _____, Robert _____ are but three of the thousands of blind people who have taken rightful advantage of the services offered by our state-federal vocational rehabilitation program.

Every day all kinds of blind people go to all kinds of jobs. Every day blind lawyers and doctors go to their offices; scientists and technicians to their laboratories; white collar workers to their desks; industrial workers to their factories; farmers to their fields and barns; students to their classrooms. Today it’s hard to find an occupational category in which the blind are not working side by side with the sighted.

The number of blind people in the United States is estimated at over 350,000. Forty per cent of them are between the ages of eighteen and sixty-five. In 1957, according to the annual report of the U. S. Office of Vocational Rehabilitation, 4005 legally blind persons were rehabilitated to self-support.

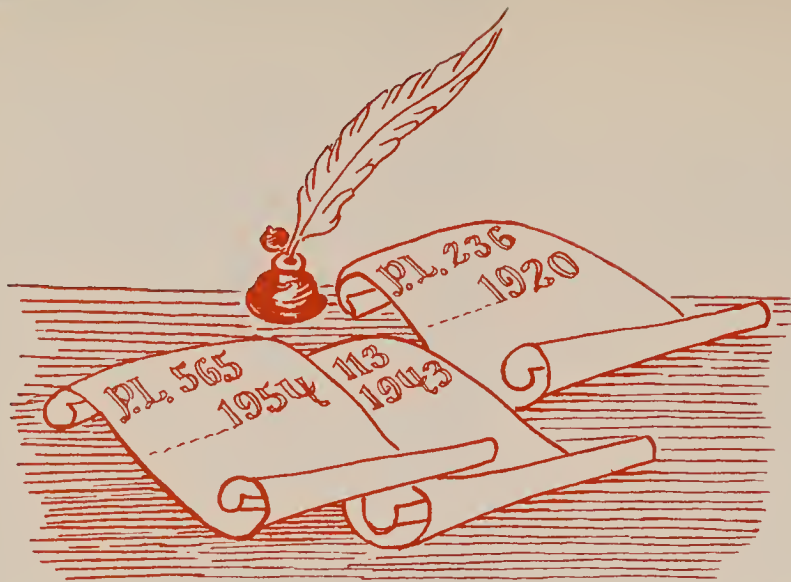
Legal Blindness



Legal blindness does not necessarily mean that a person is totally without sight. The definition used by federal and state governments is: “Central visual acuity of 20/200 or less in the better eye with correcting glasses; or central visual acuity of more than 20/200 if there is a field defect in which the peripheral field has contracted to such an extent that the widest diameter of visual field subtends to an angular distance of no greater than 20 degrees.”

In every-day language this means if anyone can only see at 20 feet what someone with normal vision can see at 200 feet, or if his field of vision is so restricted that he can see only a limited area at a time so that he can make very little practical use of his vision, he is considered blind for economic purposes.

Today any legally blind person who wants to be or could be employed can get professional help in reorganizing his life and making the necessary adjustments to become self-supporting.



Some Legislative Aid for the Blind

We might say that the basic philosophy of vocational rehabilitation dates back to the ringing words of the Declaration of Independence—the right of every individual to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” But before the turn of the 20th century most blind people were obliged to pursue happiness within the walls of their own homes or those of an institution supported by public or private funds. There was sympathy and pity for the blind and a few agencies supplying maintenance and work for them in sheltered workshops. But the idea that any blind person was capable of doing the same job as well as his sighted neighbor was so new as to be revolutionary.

Nineteen eighteen marks the date of our first nation-wide effort at rehabilitation. In that year a program for disabled veterans of World War I was initiated. Two years later Congress passed an act providing funds on a fifty-fifty basis for a state-federal rehabilitation program for disabled civilians. In theory blind people were eligible for services under this act. In practice there was little attempt to train and find employment in sheltered workshops, and some assistance was given to blind college students.

Two Congressional acts to help blind people were passed in the 1930's. The Randolph-Sheppard Act in 1936 authorized that preference be given to blind persons to operate vending stands in federal and other buildings, and in 1938 the Wagner-O'Day Act was passed which provided that the

federal government shall buy commodities produced in accordance with federal specifications by nonprofit agencies for the blind which have been approved by the Committee on Purchases of Blind-Made Products.

Throughout the '20's and '30's, there was a gradual expansion of state-federal vocational rehabilitation services for handicapped individuals. But the big leap forward in these services came in the midst of World War II.

Many blind men and women, as well as those with other physical handicaps, had taken the places of men at the front during the first World War. However, in the forties, thousands more had their first opportunity to walk through a factory entrance as employees.

During World War II over 5,000 blind people were employed in industries vital to our national defense. Their production record and reliability on the job impressed management. The public too. Many Army and Navy flags with the letter E were flying over factories where blind and crippled people, diabetic and cardiacs had voluntarily answered the call—HELP WANTED.

We began to realize that we'd been wasting one of our most valuable natural resources—human beings. If people with a handicap could make an important contribution to the war effort, they were capable of contributing to the welfare of the nation when it was at peace.

Social scientists and psychologists were teaching us a great deal about the relationship between mind and body. Medical research had developed many devices to improve physical functioning of handicapped people. Yet too many of our citizens were needlessly immobilized at home when they could have been leading productive, satisfying lives.

Even the word—rehabilitation—began to take on a broader meaning than it had formerly. In 1942, the National Council on Rehabilitation defined it as, "restoration of the handicapped to the fullest physical, mental, social, vocational, and economic usefulness of which they are capable."

During the war Army and Navy hospital personnel developed techniques to meet the demands of injured men. Concrete help was what these injured men wanted, and this is what they received. Men, blinded in service, were prepared for a new way of life. As a result, a year after the armistice, more than half of them were either working, attending college, or training for a job.

When a lady, visiting a blind soldier in an Army hospital, asked him, "Son, do you mind if I cry over you?"; his reply was, "No Ma'am, not if you do it on the other side of the room."

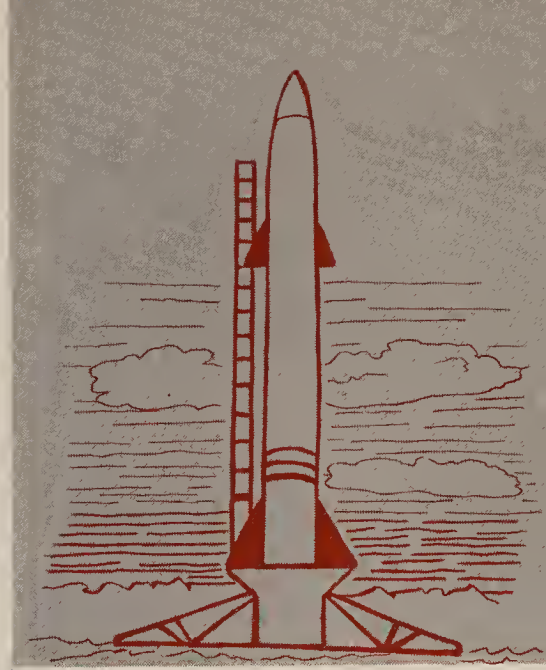
Not too polite an answer perhaps, but this soldier was busy learning how to reorganize his life. Weeping was not going to hasten the process.

In 1943, Congress passed two pieces of legislation—one providing for a comprehensive vocational rehabilitation program for veterans; the other, the Barden-LaFollette Act, for greatly increased services for handicapped individuals. Under the latter act blind people were entitled to and received many more services than they had under any other federal legislation.

But it was not until eleven years later when Congress unanimously passed Public Law 565 that we entered, what is sometimes called, "A new era in vocational rehabilitation."

The President, in signing the law, commented, "... It re-emphasizes to all the world the great value which we in America place upon the dignity and worth of each individual human being."

New Era in Vocational Rehabilitation



Under Public Law 565, any man or woman of working age is eligible for rehabilitation service provided he or she can or wants to make use of them to find employment. It makes no difference whether his handicap is physical or mental; whether it is caused by an accident at home or anywhere else, or by a disease or condition he or she has had since birth. Neither do race, creed, or color make any difference.

A medical examination, a diagnosis of problems related to his handicap, counseling, training, help in finding a job suited to his abilities, follow-up on the part of a counselor to make doubly sure that he is in the right job—all these are free services. Others will be provided without cost if the person is not in a position to finance them himself.

If, on the other hand, a blind person first needs medical treatment, or an operation, or, as in the case of many partially sighted individuals, special lenses to improve their vision, these may be provided also.

Public Law 565 strengthened the vending stand program for blind persons. Such stands may now be established on federal property in addition to those in federal buildings. In 1957, blind people were operating over 1800 stands. Other blind persons were supporting themselves and their families by running a small business or a farm, with the necessary tools, equipment, licenses, and stocks supplied through vocational rehabilitation funds.

This "giving" of rehabilitation services to the blind and other handicapped persons is based on solid, economic facts, an item which should be of interest to every taxpayer. When people are able to return to productive employment, it means a saving in millions in public funds. In the early 1950's the U. S. Office of Vocational Rehabilitation, in cooperation with state divisions of vocational rehabilitation and agencies for the blind, made a study of 66,000 persons who had been rehabilitated during a given year. One out of eight of them had formerly been receiving financial assistance from federally aided programs such as Aid to the Blind, Aid to the Permanently and Totally Disabled, Aid to Dependent Children, and Old Age Assistance.

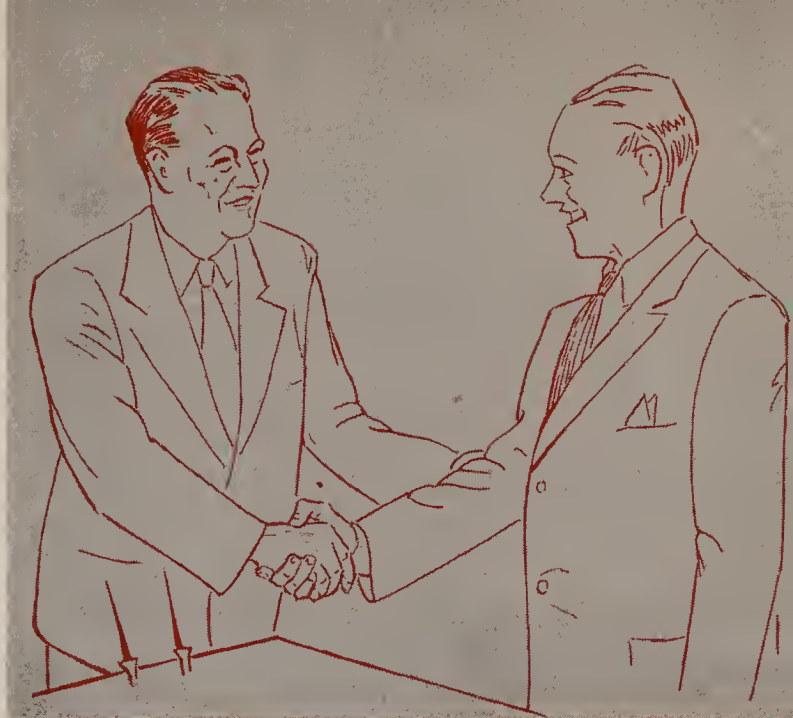
This public aid amounted to over 5½ million dollars annually. The first year these 66,000 persons became self-supporting, they earned an estimated total of 14 million and would pay, in federal taxes alone, an estimated million dollars.

To bring effective rehabilitation within the reach of everyone who could benefit from it, Congress realized that existing services would have to be improved and new ones developed. This meant that many more professionally trained rehabilitation counselors would be needed.

To accomplish this objective, Public Law 565 requires the U. S. Office of Vocational Rehabilitation to make studies, to conduct investigations, and to develop reports on the various needs and capabilities of handicapped people.

It also authorized the OVR to give grants for research for special projects and grants to colleges and universities for training rehabilitation personnel. Grants given to educational institutions are used for establishing courses to prepare people for professional careers in the rehabilitation field. In addition, traineeships could be awarded to students which included those students specializing in vocational rehabilitation counseling.

The Role of the Counselor in the Rehabilitation of a Blind Person



The counselor's aim is to help a blind person get off the sidelines and become an active player in the game of life. In a way he is a professional coach, but in a larger sense he is part of a rehabilitation team. With his skill and knowledge he draws on all public and community resources to assist his client in carrying through a rehabilitation plan they have worked out together.

He is concerned with all the potentialities and problems of the blind person—medical, psychological, social, economic, and vocational. He may not be an expert in every one of these fields but he must have a working knowledge of all of them.

On the basis of this data he assists the blind person in understanding what his assets are and what may be blocking him in his goal of self-support. Whatever his potentialities and problems, all of them are taken into consideration.

The central force in a blind individual, as in anyone else, is his personality, formed by the interweaving of hopes for the future and reactions to past experiences of which his blindness is but one. Every vocational rehabilitation plan must be custom made to fit an individual's conception of what, for him, is a life of worth and dignity.

Carrying a rehabilitation plan through to completion may be a matter of months or years. Counseling a blind youth with the desire and ability to go to college, in order to pre-

pare for a profession, means following his progress through four years of study, and, upon graduation helping him find a job in the field for which he has been trained.

It is being done every day. Recently, the Pennsylvania State Council for the Blind made a study of twenty-one students who, aided by state funds, attended college. One dropped out of school after the first year, one was not yet employed at the time the survey was made but was negotiating for a job as an agriculturist specialist. The others were working in their chosen professions including law, insurance brokerage, journalism, advertising, sales management and teaching in public, parochial schools, or college.

In some instances the rehabilitation of a blind person may take only a few months. Harry _____, a skilled mechanic, came to his state agency for the blind obsessed with the idea that he would have to find a new way of supporting his family. He was suffering from glaucoma and losing his vision so rapidly he felt he could no longer do his job.

The counselor felt that he and Harry were in danger of wasting precious time in discussing possibilities of other types of work. First things first. He sent Harry to an ophthalmologist who, after examining Harry's eyes, recommended an immediate operation for which the counselor arranged at once. Result: the operation was successful and Harry is back in the same garage where he had been formerly employed.

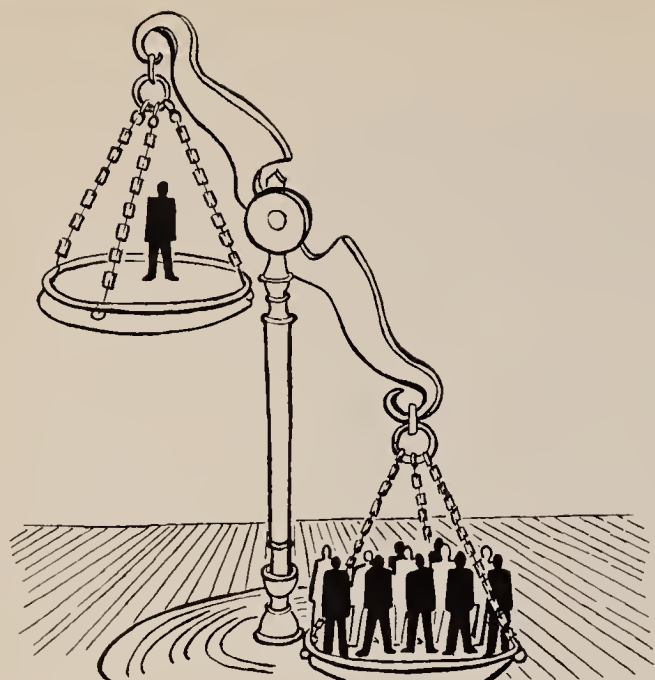
Counseling entails a grave responsibility to one's fellow human beings, requiring on the part of the counselor mature judgment, an appreciation and sensitivity to the needs of others, and initiative in meeting problem situations. Frequently a counselor comes in contact with a blind person at a critical period in life when help in facing a problem will save him or her from tobogganing down to a pit of hopelessness.

When Sara _____, age thirty, was referred to a state agency for the blind she had served time in prison. While

there she had worked in the infirmary and derived great satisfaction from "doing for others." She'd always wanted to be a trained nurse, "But now it's too late for me to amount to anything, and with my eyes going bad, I can't even be of use to anyone else."

New glasses improved her vision and a psychiatric evaluation showed that nursing was a favorable occupation for her. Sara was ready for the next step in the rehabilitation plan she and her counselor had worked out together—training for the nursing profession. For a time it looked as if she would never be able to make it. Sara's application was turned down in two places, not because of blindness but because of her prison record.

"No use trying to be somebody anymore," said Sara, "That one thing wrong I did will always be held against me." But her counselor, determined that Sara have a chance to regain her self-respect, kept contacting hospitals. Finally one accepted her for training. Sara passed her examinations with top grades, received a good character recommendation, and is now in a profession where she feels needed and which gives her prestige in her community.

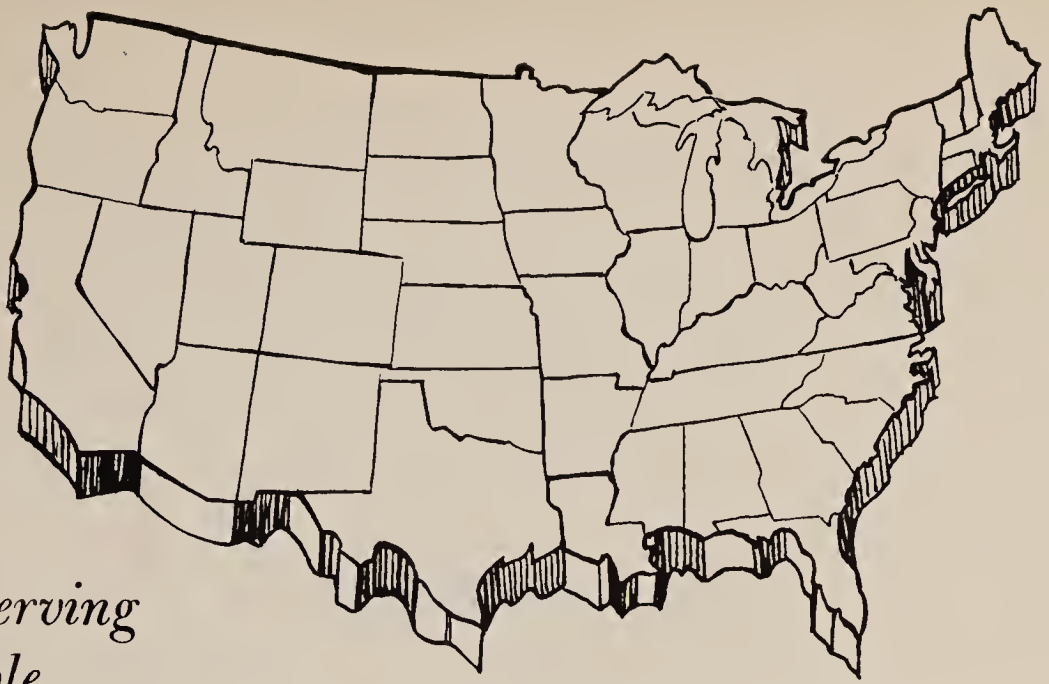


Need for Counselors of the Blind

Blindness is increasing in the United States. With the advances in medical and surgical care, the discovery and use of new drugs, we have been successful in prolonging life. But as people live longer they are also prone to degenerative diseases which may cause blindness in the later years.

We are learning more about the causes of eye diseases and how to prevent them, or at least arrest them. There has been a remarkable development in optical aids to help people with impaired vision. Nevertheless, it is estimated that there are still over 100,000 blind persons in our country who could be self-supporting with the help of rehabilitation services.

A blind person, in order to get the maximum benefit from these services needs professional counseling. This help should be immediately available, yet the blunt fact is that there is often an unfortunate delay because of the shortage of rehabilitation counselors specializing in work with the blind.

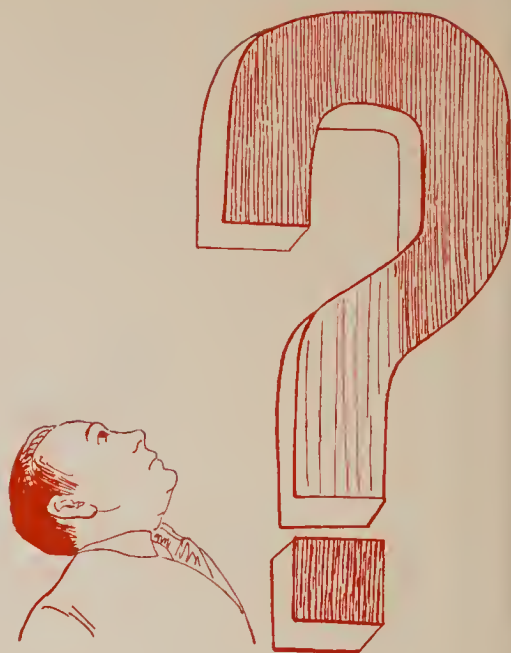


Agencies Serving Blind People

That the blind have special problems is reflected in the structure of our state-federal rehabilitation program. The U. S. Office of Vocational Rehabilitation has a special division to concentrate on work with agencies for the blind throughout the country in constantly improving services and training for people working with the blind.

Thirty-eight states maintain separate agencies providing multiservices for the blind. In the other states, in the District of Columbia, and in the other insular possessions, one central agency offers rehabilitation services to all handicapped individuals. In nearly every state there are voluntary agencies providing the blind with a variety of specialized services.

How Does One Become a Counselor of the Blind?



Qualifications for the position of rehabilitation counselor vary with different agencies. While personnel standards are not uniform, more and more agencies are requiring that a beginner in the field have a background of four years liberal arts course, plus two years graduate work in rehabilitation leading to a masters degree.

There are many educational institutions throughout the country offering graduate courses in vocational rehabilitation. Many of these, in cooperation with the U. S. Office of Vocational Rehabilitation, offer traineeships for graduate study in rehabilitation counseling.

The list of cooperating schools which offer traineeships and information on the amounts and requirements, may be obtained from the Division of Training, Office of Vocational Rehabilitation, United States Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Washington 25, D. C.

The first year of study is usually of an academic classroom nature. During the second year, field work in some agency engaged in rehabilitation of the handicapped is generally required. An individual, wishing to specialize in work with blind persons, should request that his field work be with an agency for the blind, where under supervision, he will gain experience in many facets of the work.

Job Opportunities in Work with the Blind

There are about 400 voluntary and governmental agencies in this country providing services to blind persons. Not all the voluntary agencies employ vocational rehabilitation counselors, although many of them are enlarging their staff to include them.

A Directory of Agencies Serving Blind Persons

A Directory of Agencies Serving Blind Persons, both in the United States and Canada, is published periodically by the American Foundation for the Blind, 15 West 16th Street, New York 11, N. Y. It can be purchased from the Foundation or referred to in its library, or in many public and university libraries.

Positions for professionally trained rehabilitation counselors are plentiful. Salaries range, depending on the agency, from \$4,500 to \$5,500 for the first year with a top of \$6,500. The entrance classification is usually that of a junior counselor, with promotion at the end of a year to counselor, and, in time, depending on merit, to senior counselor.

As services for blind persons expand, and new rehabilitation facilities are developed, there is always the possibility for advancement to administrative positions.





Compensations of Working with Blind Persons

You will probably never hear a counselor for blind people say he is in the work because there's "big money" in it.

As one counselor expressed it in a discussion with his colleagues, "If a fat paycheck at the end of every week is what a person is after and he doesn't much care what he does to get it, he should stay out of counseling. It's not for him."

"I'll buy that," said another, "and more. Unless you enjoy working with people, all kinds of people, you don't belong in an agency for the blind. Routine desk work, filling out forms and such, is only a small part of the job of a counselor. In the course of one day you may be visiting a blind person in his home; another at a rehabilitation center and still another on his job to see how they are progressing; then on to consult a minister interested in helping a blind member of his congregation; and from there to an appointment with the personnel manager of a business or a factory to convince him "there's a

job in his company a blind client of yours is qualified to do.”

“Time was,” reminisced a counselor who’d specialized in job placement of blind people for many years, “you’d be kicked out of an office for even suggesting they hire a blind person. I don’t think that’s true anymore. At least management will listen.”

“There’s still a big public relations job to be done,” cautioned another, “before some employers realize that a blind person can be as active and productive as a sighted person. And that goes for the general public too.”

“Isn’t that why you went into counseling the blind in the first place?” asked someone, and immediately answered his own question. “It’s the daily challenge of the work that appeals to me. When a client of mine finds a job he’s trained for and wants, I feel so good I want to celebrate.”

“One reason you get such a kick out of working with a blind person is because you’ve had time to listen to him and to know him. You’ve had a close personal relationship with him,” said one counselor. “Before specializing in work with the blind I was doing counseling of people with every type of handicap. I had a caseload of 150. That’s far too many. I couldn’t even remember the names of some of my clients.”

“The caseload for a counselor for the blind has got to be smaller than the average caseload a counselor in a general rehabilitation agency is expected to carry,” affirmed another. “As someone said it’s not only tougher to place a blind person in the right job for him, his rehabilitation process is often longer and more complicated than say that of an amputee. Once an amputee gets fitted with an artificial limb, if he hasn’t any further medical or personal problems, he’s ready to go back to work. But golly, after you’ve traveled step by step with a person who has recently lost his sight, perhaps has even had to learn a brand new occupation late in life and is successful in reaching his goal and is an independent citizen again, you know you’ve been active in a great personal battle and victory!”



Printed in U.S.A. 1959

HV1710 Wood, Maxine. c.1
W851 A CAREER WITH A CHALLENGE;
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Date Due

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